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AUTHOR Stanberry, Anne M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses family systems theory and advances a communicative model of family functioning that is process orientated and encourages children to develop self-control. Family systems theory postulates that each member of a family has an impact on the behaviors of other family members, and that children's behavior is influenced by their developmental history, interactions with people, living conditions, and the values, attitudes, and beliefs of their family of origin and society. The communicative model postulates that when a functional family is faced with new information, the family works with it, makes appropriate changes based on an exchange of ideas, and brings the changes back into the family environment. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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Communication:

Helping Families Adapt to Developmental Changes

Anne M. Stanberry, Ph.D., CHE, CFLE

School of Home Economics

University of Southern Mississippi

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I'd like to talk with you about a communication model that is process oriented and leads to children gaining control from within. That is, after all, our objective, isn't it? We want children to learn to control themselves.

Before I talk about my communication model, though, I want to briefly review with you family systems theory.

In systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), we believe that each part of the system interacts with each other part of the system. In a family with one parent and one child, we could visualize the interaction this way:

The parent interacts with and influences the child and the child interacts with and influences the parent.

The more people in the family, the more complex the interactions will be. So, if we have a 5 person family, the interactional pattern would look like this:

A

E B

D C

[Name family members--have a preschooler, elementary schooler and adolescent]

When one part of the family system changes it affects the entire family. Every part of the system must change.

This is the reason, I believe, that we cannot look only at an individual family member--such as a child. We must look at the child as he or she interacts within the context of larger systems.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1985) offers us a way to look at the individual and the systems he/she interacts with. Do you know Bronfenbrenner's ecological model?

I don't want to go off chasing rabbits here, but let's remember that the child's behavior is influenced by his/her

<u>developmental history</u>: born premature? cry a lot? illness as a child? parents divorce?

interactions with people and the kinds of interactions he has: does he have a nurturing relationship with the coach? conflictual relationship with Dad? no men in his life? does Mom like him to be in ceramics and Dad hate the idea?

the conditions in which he lives: is the neighborhood safe to play in? is there drug dealing or gang activity going on around him? does he go to day care every day? does mom work nights?

the values, attitudes and beliefs of his family of origin and society: is the 2 parent family prized? does the family think love conquers all? is mom the matriarch? are girls expected to have a baby so more money will come into the family? are adolescents expected to go to college?

Family systems theory emphasizes the multi-dimensional influences on individuals and their reciprocal influences on the other systems. There is interactivity between systems (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

As family professional, we use family systems theory to more accurately understand each family member's behavior.

The family and its subsystems are constantly changing (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Nichols & Everett, 1986). If the system is open, if it is an open family system, it keeps its organization even though

there is continuous change in the parts. We can compare it to the water in a river; the water is constantly changing, yet the river keeps its boundaries and course. The molecules of human cells are constantly changing yet the biological systems keep functioning. Each person in the family of origin (FOO) keeps changing, yet the family members know who is in and who is not in the family. The boundary lines around the family are permeable.

[draw]

They let information in, the family works with it, makes appropriate changes, and applies the changes/information back into the environment (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

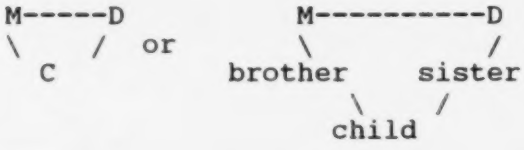
This information, in turn, gives important clues as to the most effective strategies to use in working with the family. We are looking at PROCESSES and RELATIONSHIPS.

For example: _____is in kindergarten. Someone comes to school and invites children to join T ball teams. ____ loves ball and goes home and asks his parents if he can play T ball. The family discusses it and decides yes or no. Bill goes back to school and signs up or does not sign up for T ball.

1. NEW Information

I want to play T ball

2. Transformation interaction/decisions



Discuss pros/cons, barriers, consequences to rest of family- what will it mean to rest of family (practice, games, celebrations, special clothing, trips, equipment)

3. Applied Information

Bill tells teacher yes or no knows **why** it was decided and **what it means** to family

4. Result/Learning/Feeling

Result:
he is happy, well-adjusted, models healthy functioning with peers

Learned: I can talk to my parents; we can solve problems together. I'm learning the questions to ask, what to think about in making a decision. I feel valued because I am a part of the family decision making process.

The focus is not on the outcome (to play or not) the focus is on the PROCESS--how the decision is made. This is an example of an authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1966).

This family system--if an open system--has maintained its organization even though there is a change occurring (Falicov, 1988).

The family has kept its essential identity by:

1. revising the relationship among family members
2. creating a new structure/subsystem --make room for T ball- and all that it means, practice, games, dinner delayed

and/or

3. creating new, higher levels of organization that coordinate existing substructures (i.e., reorganized the family to include something important to family member--it takes more organization to have a T ball player in the family)

Everyone is still "in " the family, the boundary is the same, the new information has been processed and a decision was made. Everyone felt comfortable with it.

What happens, though, if the system is closed?

1. New Information	2. Transformation interactions decisions	3. Applied information	4. Results/ Learning

Possibilities

M= no/yes
D= n/y
M & D= n/y
M = ask D, D = y/n
D = ask M, M = y/n
M = y/n, if D agrees
D = y/n, if M agrees
M/D = y/n, then changes mind
M/D = ???

1. New information	2. Transformation interactions decision	3. Applied information	4. Results/ learning
1st grade I want to play ball	parent = yes	signs up, later: no $, must drop	must ask permission; doesn't know what went into decision; even when ask parent and permission is given, may not work out; FEELING: can't trust parent
	Parent = no	doesn't sign up	angry, conflict should have waited for good mood, don't understand reasons; may decide its better to not ask to do anything; FEELING:
	parent = ???? or "we'll see"	how to respond?	can't get an answer; can't count on parents; FEELING: confusion, hopelessness
7th grade I want a guitar	C--M= ask D C--D= no why? "does not make enough music"	doesn't sign up	If I play an instrument, can't be of my choice; I can't make decisions; I must ask permission; FEELING: helpless.
12th grade May I enter tain boys in my bed-room?	C--M= OK if OK with D C--D=**NO**, conflict, argument		Dad won't let me do what I want; I can probably get by if only Mom knows; FEELING: flight, anger, frustration
Young adult I am going to be an elementary teacher	D--C, no, you will starve, go to med school	goes to med school	flunks out goes to dental school FEELING: miserable, not doing what he wants, no control

If family system is closed, it won't let information in or won't process it in a healthy way. The system becomes dysfunctional. The boundary is not permeable.

[stop and let each dyad role play a parent and child in dysfunctional dialogue.]

Use T ball example and let Dad say yes if mom says yes.
Mom says "no" you might get hurt.
How did you feel when you were told "no"?

In systems thinking, we focus more on the PROCESS and RELATIONSHIPS among the system's parts--not on the decision or outcome.

Systems move in the direction of adjusting to or incorporating more and more of the environment. They adapt to change. Each new piece of information that comes to the family produces tension-the balance or homeostasis is interrupted. The organization of the family is disrupted (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

Families with children go through stages of development--intense times of tension and change. The tension must be resolved or the family becomes dysfunctional. The way the FOO adapts to making changes has a lasting effect on individual family members.

Robert Emde (1991) says that before 2 years of age children have internalized expectations about reciprocity and turn taking behaviors, if I do this, mamma will do this. They have a set of rules that tells them where things belong, what is expected and what to do in specific circumstances.

Have you ever read a story to a child and read the wrong word or tried to skip a page? They know right away you are reading it wrong or skipping a page.

Emde says these internalized expectations are built through the interactions between the child and primary caregiver(s). This goes along with what Bowlby (1977) and Ainsworth (1979) have told us about attachment theory.

Children have internalized expectations of relationships (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1977; Bretherton, 1985; Hibbs, 1989; Mayseless, 1991). If mothers are responsive and available, the child will have a pattern in his/her head that says "when I cry, mamma comes; when I need help, mamma is there". These are securely attached children. They are willing to move away from mother and explore, knowing if they get in trouble, mother will help.

If mother is inconsistently responsive, children will become anxiously attached. They will not move away from mother as easily because they aren't confident of mother's availability. They are

not sure what to expect; they fear disappointment. Ainsworth called these children Insecure-ambivalent or anxiously attached.

If mother rejects the child, the child defends him/herself by avoiding mother. These children learn at an early age that they must take care of themselves, they can count on no one. Ainsworth (1979) calls these children insecure-avoidant.

Other studies have replicated the results of Bowlby and Ainsworth work (Bretherton, 1985; Mayseless, 1991). In fact, attachment researchers have shown that attachment status in the first year of life predicts development throughout the lifespan.

How does this relate to the communication model I have put on the board?

If we begin to communicate with children in healthy ways, what will be the result? What are the possible outcomes you can think of?

1. This pattern of communication will be incorporated into their psyches. They will begin to ask themselves the questions about a decision that will lead them to self-regulation, control from within.

2. They will feel good about themselves because they have been included in the communication process.

3. They will feel their parents/caregivers are consistent; they can go to them with any request and know it will be processed--they won't be put down or made fun of--this leads to more trusting relationships and more secure attachments.

This model of communication is process oriented. Children begin to interact in a pattern that empowers them to take control of their lives. It takes time to build these patterns; to do the talking, the necessary listening and explaining. But, it seems to me that through the communication process we are improving the quality of life for individuals and families. We are preparing children for as life of self-control and they, in turn, will teach the same skills to their children and these skills will be passed from generation to generation.

Thank you for participating. What questions do you want to ask?

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